

EOP: Personal Stories of Success

By Paul Grondahl | Photography: Tara Engberg

"The Educational Opportunity Program taught us that, given the opportunity, we could be anything we wanted to be."

— James Walker, B.S.'74,
Bronx substance abuse counselor for the state prison system

they felt as close-knit as family members within their EOP community. They shared more personal stories, too, of how EOP helped them believe in themselves and gave them the confidence and skills to rise up from poverty and to overcome the undertow of crime-ridden neighborhoods. They expressed pride in becoming the first members of their families to graduate from college. Despite the variety of stories, the common denominator was EOP.

"It taught us that we were somebody and, given the opportunity, that we could be anything we wanted to be," said Walker, the substance abuse counselor in state prisons who lives in The Bronx.

"When you think I came from literally nothing in terms of family life and living on my own since age 15, it's amazing to me how far I've come," said McKinnon, the State Farm Insurance agency owner. "EOP was a program with a heart, and I'm very grateful for the people in it who gave me so much love and support."

"EOP gave me opportunities, and I am who I am today because of all these people at this reunion," said Toxi Clark, B.A.'76, who lives in Washington, D.C., and is chief investigator of welfare fraud for the District of Columbia. Clark followed her older sister, Antoinette Clark Adams, B.A.'74, who lives in East Brunswick, N.J. and chairs the special education department at New Brunswick High School.

"EOP started me out with the foundation of studying and friendship and guidance," Adams said. "EOP was our fraternity, our sorority, our support network all in one. It also helped us move out of our little circle and taught us how to operate out in the larger world."

During his 20 years of running EOP, Carr has steadily expanded its scope. He developed and published a comprehensive study skills booklet and created an expansive tutoring program.

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— Tracia Callender, B.S.'94,
Queens attorney

Today, there are 24 study groups for freshmen that meet twice a week to help reinforce study habits. Even before classes begin in September, all 145 EOP students arrive on campus for a mandatory five-week academic program. "When they arrive for classes in the fall, they are anchored in the University, know where to go and understand what's expected of them," Carr said. Not all schools have that requirement, and UAlbany is considered one of the more stringent institutions among the 50 EOP programs at colleges and universities in New York State. Carr is proud of the EOP program's graduation rate, which has risen from 25 percent in 1985 to more than 65 percent. Also, the retention rate is nearly 90 percent, and

of the 95 EOP graduating seniors in 2005, 41 of them have earned a 3.0 grade point average or higher. More than 50 percent of them are going on to graduate school.

"I'm really happy with our results," said Carr, who can relate to the experiences of the EOP students. He was one of seven children raised by a single mother on public assistance in Philadelphia. College offered a remarkable opportunity. He commuted three hours each way by bus, subway and on foot the first year to attend West Chester University his first year and was one of only a few African-American students admitted in 1954.

Many at the EOP alumni reunion described Carr as a mentor whose help didn't end with graduation. "He's very busy, but he always makes time for me when I call him asking for help," said Williams, who deals with EOP matters in her administrative position with the New York Institute of Technology.

For attorney Brewington, who has remained active in UAlbany alumni affairs and is a past president of the Alumni Association, the EOP program was an indispensable part of his college experience. "It was my proving ground and gave me an education I might not have received," he said. "I see enormous value in the program. Aside from the academic support, it provides social and personal nurturing that has



EOP alumni gather for a reunion photo last May. Opposite: an early EOP class. (Photo courtesy of University archives.)

Frederick Brewington, B.A.'79, is a noted civil rights attorney with a law practice on Long Island. Theresa Williams, B.A.'90, M.A.'91, is director of academic support programs for the New York Institute of Technology in Manhattan. Penny McKinnon, B.A.'76, owns a State Farm Insurance Agency in a suburb of Schenectady, N.Y. James Walker, B.S.'74, is a substance abuse counselor for the New York State Department of Correctional Services.

Tracia Callender, B.S.'94, is an attorney in Queens who frequently represents poor single mothers in eviction cases.

In addition to their *alma mater*, those five University at Albany alumni share another deep and lasting bond as participants in UAlbany's Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), which provides assistance and services to economically and educationally disadvantaged students. EOP began in 1968 at UAlbany and now has 650 students

participating in its broad range of academic and support programs. It is run by Carson Carr, associate vice president for academic affairs, and his staff of six EOP counselors, five instructors and two graduate assistants.

At an EOP alumni reunion weekend luncheon last May 7, dozens of former EOP students — including several who were in the first group in 1968 — recalled the common thread in their experiences on campus and how



EOP reunion celebration

made an impact on society, judging by what the EOP alumni have done in their careers.”

“I wouldn’t have been prepared to run my own business without EOP, which taught me how to get along in corporate America and how to create a successful venture,” said Brian Heron, B.S.’73, a telecommunications consultant in Westchester County and a freshman in the first EOP class in 1968.

“EOP taught me responsibility and helped nurture me as a student when I was worried or concerned or just unsure of myself,” said Karen Williams, B.A.’77, a Delta Airlines flight attendant who lives in Fairburn, Ga.

Of course, EOP is not solely about academic support services. The alumni spoke animatedly of their EOP student association, of memorable musical concerts they booked, of the African-style dance routines of the Burundi Dance Troupe, and of their social gatherings.

“Like so many of us, I grew up in the ghetto, poor, raised by a single mom, the whole nine yards. I didn’t learn much in high school and needed to work hard to reach college academic standards when I got here,” said Tracia Callender, the Brooklyn attorney. “Without EOP, I wouldn’t have been able to become a lawyer.”

Tyshena Hunter, B.A.’94, M.S.’97, an EOP counselor, has seen the experience from both sides. “There’s a strong sense of community and shared purpose, like a big family,” she said. “EOP students receive a lot of encouragement, as I did, and they’re able to develop strong ties and lifelong friends. There’s a sense of security and a feeling that you’re home.” ■

Laurence Austin, B.A.’81: Making the Most of Opportunities

It’s only five miles by boat from Huntington, Long Island, where Laurence Austin grew up poor, to Greenwich, Conn., where he now runs a successful hedge fund investment partnership. But the distance

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— Laurence Austin, B.A.’81,
hedge fund manager

represents a lifetime of achievements. Austin, co-founder and chairman of Endeavour Capital

Advisors, Inc., credits his mother, Irene Austin, with encouraging him to apply to the University at Albany. An underachiever in high school, he was accepted in 1976 through UAlbany’s Educational Opportunity Program, which provided him academic mentoring and financial aid.

“The financial support was absolutely critical,” he recalled in a telephone conversation from his office last June. “The stipend I received was all the money that I had. It paid for all of my living expenses, from paper to clothing.”

Feeling fortunate to be at UAlbany as an EOP student, Austin said he tried to make the most of his opportunity, and spent a “fair amount” of time at the library. After a summer job on Wall Street, he began taking all of the economics courses he could, although he graduated with a major in psychology.

Moving to Tucson, Ariz., at the height of the 1981 recession, Austin briefly waited tables before landing a job making copies of research reports at the Tucson office of Merrill Lynch. (“I would have worked for free if I had to.”) He read the reports and began his climb to success in the securities industry, working six years for Merrill Lynch, then joining a small firm on Long Island where he specialized in buying and selling banks and other financial institutions. In 1993, Austin and a partner founded Endeavour Capital Advisors, which now has 13 employees and makes investments in the financial services industry.

It all started at UAlbany, says Austin, who recently gave an initial gift of \$5,000 to the EOP program.

“It’s just something I’ve always wanted to do — give back — since the University was so helpful to me at a point in my life when I really needed it,” he said. “Without the college degree, I know I would not have been able to progress as far as I have.”

— Christine Hanson McKnight

EOP at UAlbany

◆ The program: Provides assistance and services to economically and educationally disadvantaged students

◆ Founded: 1968

◆ Current enrollment: 650 students

◆ Retention rate from freshman to sophomore year: nearly 90 percent

◆ Academic success: Of the 95 EOP graduating seniors in 2005, 41 earned a 3.0 grade point average or higher. More than 50 percent of them are going on to graduate school.

◆ EOP Alumni: 3,740